

Joseph Beuys

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Beuys melting fat for *Tallow*. 1977
Photo Caroline Tisdall

Born in 1921 in Cleves, Germany, Joseph Beuys is best known as an artist of international stature, but he is equally dedicated as an educator, social reformer, politician and—perhaps most important—humanist. The sources of his art are never strictly aesthetic, just as his references are intentionally broad. This breadth of meaning in conjunction with non-traditional, provocative forms and media often makes Beuys' work extremely difficult to understand.

"Everyone an artist" is the clearest formulation of Beuys' intention, a concept which has contributed to the controversy that has surrounded him since he first emerged as a major figure—genius for some, charlatan for others—in the sixties. Beuys challenges narrow definitions of art and the specialized activities of artists by proposing the process of living itself as the creative field; hence the extension of his own work beyond sculpture and drawing into teaching and politics.

For Beuys, the key to an understanding of the world is to be found in sculpture or, more precisely, in material. By material he means everything that conveys the energies which give meaning and direction to life. Thus he has progressed from the traditional sculptural media like bronze and wood to more direct vehicles of metaphorical meaning, notably fat, felt, iron and copper, and finally to the intangible materials we all use to give shape and expression to thought: language, speech, movement and social organization. Beuys' Theory of Sculpture led him to develop his "Social Sculpture," which led in turn to the formation of the German Student Party, the Organization for Direct Democracy and the Free International University. All of Beuys' activities—from performances with a hare, a horse or a coyote to twelve-hour lectures and a sculpture consisting of twenty tons of fat—share a common purpose: "the victory of socialist warmth and self-determination over materialist greed and alienation."

The present exhibition and catalogue have been structured by the artist and guest curator Caroline Tisdall around twenty-four "stations," each dominated by one or more large pieces with smaller thematically related works.

Beuys' biography figures prominently in his work, more as a medium than for its own sake. The northern European myths and traditions of his childhood have left their impact on him and have emerged—transformed—in his sculpture and draw-



Judith (from The secret block for a secret person in Ireland). 1957
Private Collection

ings, and his early fascination with the natural sciences continues to be reflected in his art.

In 1940 Beuys began training as an aircraft radio operator. Later he was a combat pilot on the Russian front, where he was seriously wounded several times. On one such occasion in 1943, when his airplane crashed in the Crimea, Beuys' life was saved by a band of Tartar nomads who found him. They applied their traditional healing methods, covering his body with fat and an outer insulation of felt. Years later, in the early sixties, fat and felt appeared in Beuys' sculpture and have since taken their place among his most characteristic media, just as the image of the wound and themes of death, healing and survival frequently emerge as insistent themes.

During the war years Beuys, who had considered a career in the natural sciences, decided to become an artist. His wartime experiences, concern with the causes of Nazism and the profound effects of the war, and his disillusionment with the restricted vision of traditional natural science all impelled his change of direction. When he returned to Cleves at the end of the war, Beuys associated with a group of artists there, and in 1947 began to study sculpture at the Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf. From 1949 to 1951 he studied under Ewald Mataré, whose post as Professor of Sculpture at the Kunstakademie he was to assume between 1961 and 1972.

The intervening years between his studies and the assumption of his teaching post were marked by intense personal development and growth. The postwar period, difficult for all Germans, was a time of extreme pain and introspection for Beuys. The artist's depression and anguish persisted throughout the fifties and coincided with his early explorations of the form and meaning of sculpture, when



Queen Bee (from The secret block for a secret person in Ireland). 1952
Private Collection

he worked to build up a basic vocabulary ranging from skull and bone structure to fundamental geometric form. His drawings from this time convey a sense of shamanism, a characteristic significant in relation to his later performances or "actions." The shaman is a dominant metaphor for the artist and his medium is, indeed, ultimately a kind of ritual.

Elements of botany, alchemy, religion, mathematics and technology emerge and reemerge throughout his work, as do references to the relationship between humans and animals. While Beuys exploits this relationship for its ecological and evolutionary content, he also imbues it with a sense of primitive or mythic ritual. These concerns are reflected in the drawings, such as *The secret block for a secret person in Ireland*. Caroline Tisdall has written in the catalogue of this exhibition:

Throughout the years drawing has been a way of thinking for Beuys: "thinking form." Plant form, animals, geological structure, myths and invisible energies all appear in drawings as a more concentrated way of thinking is developed, linking intuitive and rational processes so that patterns emerge in the phenomena of the world and in the individual's experience of it. . . .

Many of these drawings have a hovering, almost mediumistic quality that conveys the receptive state in which they were made. This is particularly accentuated when the subjects have to do with death, with natural, geological, or skeletal structure, or with animals traditionally endowed with extraordinary powers:

[Beuys himself adds]

The figures of the horse, the stag, the swan and the hare constantly come and go: figures which pass freely from one level of existence to another, which represent the incarnation of the soul or the earthly form of spiritual beings with access to other regions. (pp. 20-21)

Concerned as he is with the importance and power of language, Beuys proves to be exceptionally articulate about his work. The following excerpts from the artist's own statements in the catalogue focus on selected pieces in the exhibition.

Station 1, *Bathtub*, 1960.

My intention with this work was to recall my point of departure and with it the experience and feeling of my childhood. It acts as a kind of autobiographical key: an object from the outer world, a solid material thing invested with energy of a spiritual nature. You could call this substance, and it is the transformation of substance that is my concern in art, rather than the traditional aesthetic understanding of beautiful appearances. If creativity relates to the transformation, change and development of substance, then it can be applied to everything in the world, and is no longer restricted to art.

The idea of contact with material implies this wider concept of art and of human work and activity in general, and that for me is the meaning of this object. It suggests initial contact with elements like water—moving life—and heat. Some people say "Beuys is crazy, his bath water must have been too hot." Such old sayings have deep roots and some unconscious truth.

Then there is the fat inside the tub, lying there like a moulding or sculpting hand of the kind which lies behind everything in the world. By this I mean creativity in the anthropological sense, not restricted to artists. The relationship is with realities rather than artifacts.

In the same way biography means more than just a personal thing. It means the interrelationship of all processes and not the splitting of life into separate compartments: a wholeness. By biography I understand the development of everything. My personal history is of interest only in so far as I have attempted to use my life and person as a tool, and I think this was so from a very early age. But it would be wrong to interpret the *Bathtub* as a kind of self-reflection. Nor does it have anything to do with the concept of the Readymade: quite the opposite, since the stress is on the meaning of the object. It relates to the reality of being born in such an area and in such circumstances. (p. 10)



Beuys with *Bathtub*. 1960
Bathtub with fat, gauze and adhesive strips
Private Collection
Photo L. Rinn © München

While the preceding statement provides insight into the integration of Beuys' life with his art, he sees *Pt Co Fe*, 1948-72, Station 2, in terms of opposing forces that are constantly changing; it is not a fixed or even finished work.

Artist's inscription:

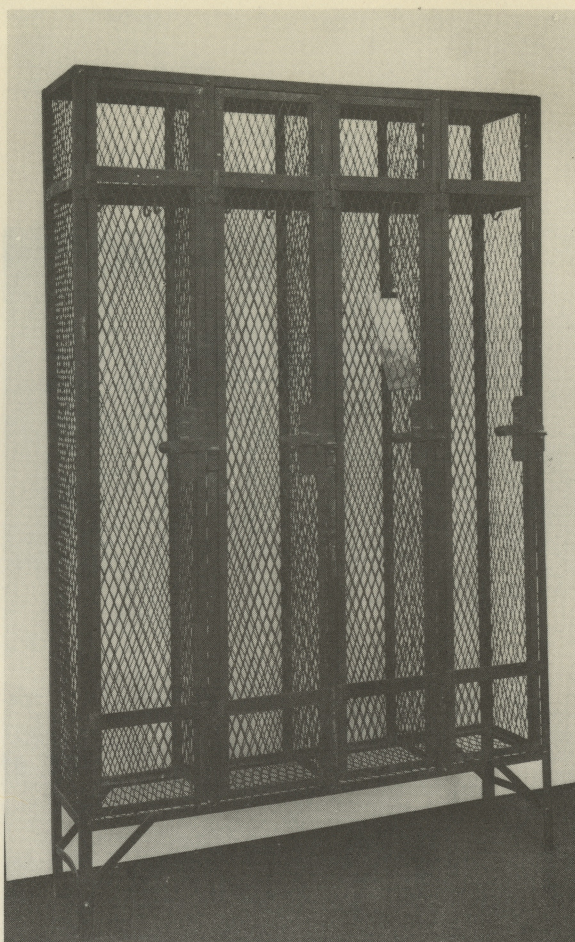
The clamp which hangs in this iron cage . . . held in turn: from 1948 to 1954 a small head of Mars, from 1954 to 1958 a plaster head of Napoleon, from 1958 to 1963 an amorphous lump of plaster with fat, from 1963 to 1972 a block of copper of the same shape as the block of cobalt and platinum which is now attached to the clamp.

The text describes the history of the piece. The end result incorporates a process through time, a history of change and a biographical sequence. Each successive stage adds an element to the final condition. Mars for instance represents the iron family, and Napoleon is a personification of the Mars principle. Iron is often present in my work as the male element, sometimes balanced by the female element copper. In *Pt Co Fe* the iron family is represented—with the exception of nickel, chromium, manganese, tungsten and vanadium because I did not want too pedantic a description. First the iron of the cage itself, present too in the claw of the clamp, then the higher stages in platinum, and its cobalt coating.

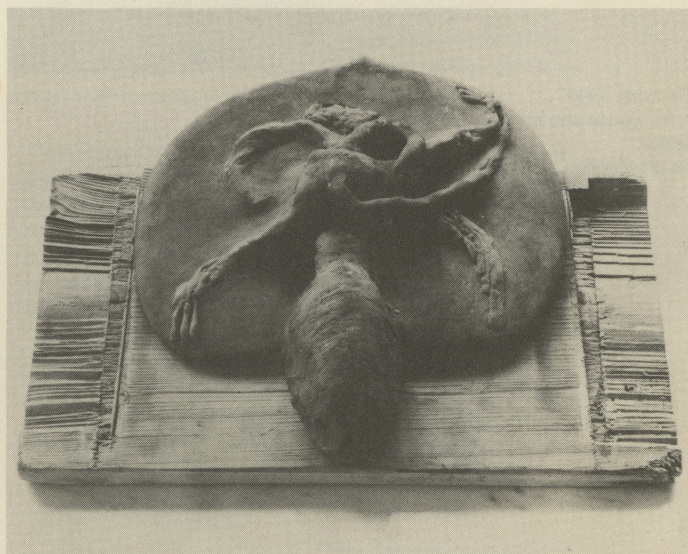
The object is intended as a transmitter radiating ideas from a deep background in time through an accretion of layers of meaning and biography, functioning like a Faraday cage in which the power is retained through a kind of grid. The object transmits while the text demonstrates. (p. 26)

Beuys interprets animals and insects as he does metals, metaphorically, in all their possible ramifications. He is especially interested in the bee as it relates to a political and social context. Its image recurs in a variety of manifestations throughout his work, but

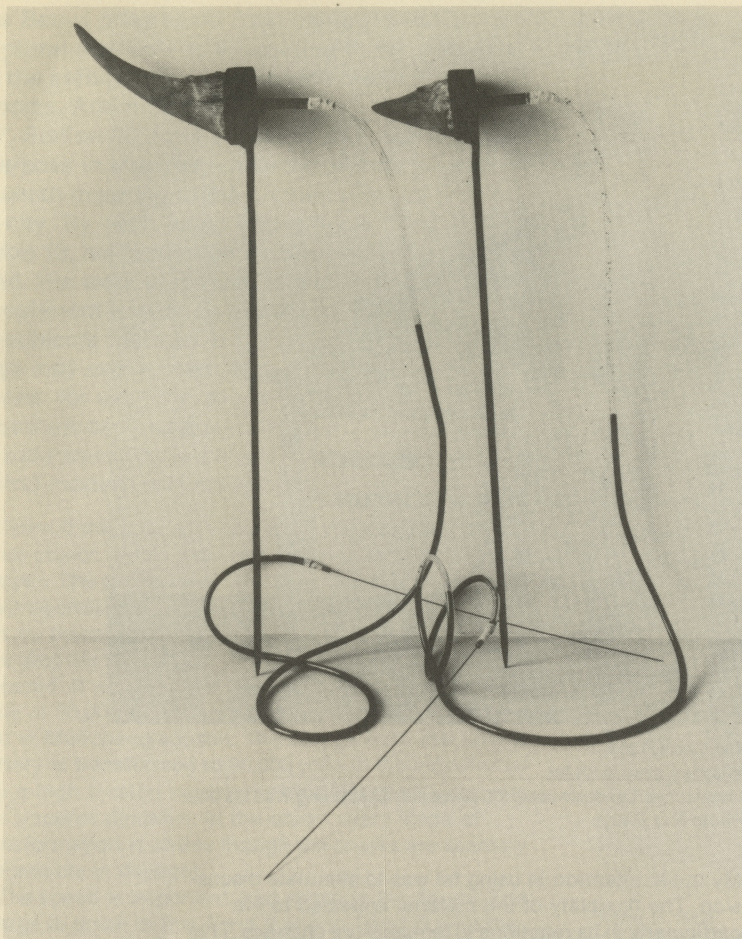
Only *Queen Bee III* shows the formal characteristics of a bee . . . What interested me was the general *warmth character*, which forms an important part of the Theory of Sculpture and extends even to social and political concepts. This warmth character is to be found in honey, in wax, and even in the pollen and nectar gathered from plants. In mythology honey was regarded as a spiritual substance, and bees were godly. The bee cult is basically a Venus cult . . . This was widespread and influenced by the whole process of honey production as a link between earthly and heavenly levels. The influx of a substance from the whole environment—plants, minerals and sun—was the essence of the bee cult. The allusion is to socialism, as practised in the big watch-making co-operatives of the Republic of the Bees at La Chaux-de-Fonds. There you can still see many sculptures of bees on the walls and foundations, as symbols of socialism. This does not mean mechanistic state socialism, but a socialist organism in which all parts function as in a living body. In physiological terms this is not hierarchical: the queen bee's place lies between head and heart, and the drones become the cells which are constantly renewed. The whole builds a unity which has to function perfectly, but in a humane warm way through principles of cooperation and brotherhood. (p. 44)



Pt Co Fe. 1948-72
Iron, cobalt and platinum
Collection W. Feelisch, Remscheid
Photo Eva Beuys



Queen Bee III. 1952
Beeswax on wood
Hessisches Landesmuseum Darmstadt, Sammlung Karl Ströher
Photo Fritz Gettlinger



Horns. 1960
Bronze with plastic tube and blood
Hessisches Landesmuseum Darmstadt, Sammlung Karl Ströher
Photo Eva Beuys

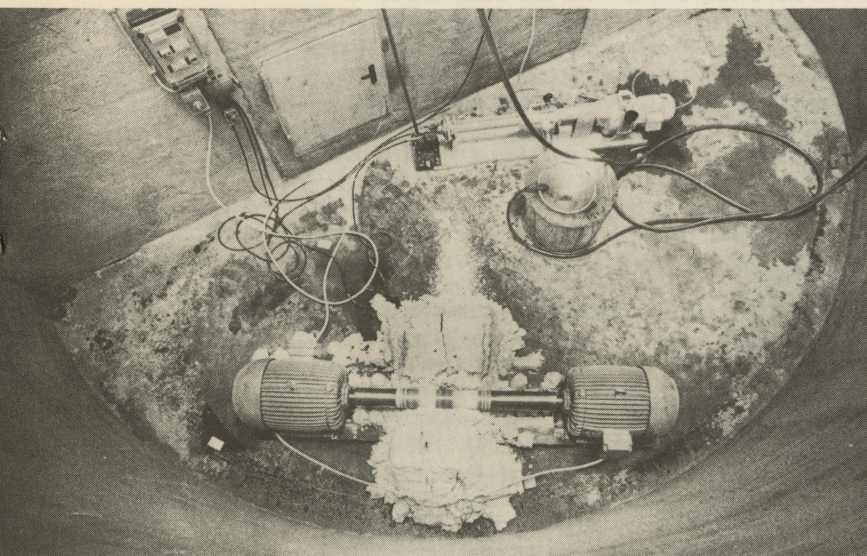
The idea of circulation within an organism is central to much of Beuys' art. *Horns*, 1969, Station 6, is one of the artist's most direct expressions of this concept.

Here the principle of the double appears as the symmetry of every animal's head: two eyes, two nostrils, two antlers, two horns. Antlers, even more than horns, show the deep mystery of the bloodstream flowing from the interior and continuing to circulate out on the head. A stag's antlers are the emanation of its entire venous, hormonal and nervous systems throughout a yearly cycle. For me they relate to the inwardness of a feeling being, the soul power, like blood in an artery, represented here by the hare's blood in tubes extended by long copper feelers or antennae. (p. 58)

Beuys has most recently developed these ideas in *Honey pump*, 1977, Station 24.

With *Honey pump* I am expressing the principle of the Free International University working in the bloodstream of society. Flowing in and out of the heart organ—the steel honey container—are the main arteries through which the honey is pumped out of the engine room with a pulsing sound, circulates round the Free University area, and returns to the heart. The whole thing is only complete with people in the space round which the honey artery flows and where the bee's head is to be found in the coiled loops of tubing with its two iron feelers. (p. 254)

By the early sixties Beuys had become a dominant force in contemporary German art. His increasing importance was due to his position of authority and popularity at the Kunstakademie and to his work as well, which was attracting growing critical and public attention. At this time he was actively involved with *Fluxus*, a group of artists committed to expanding the forms of artistic expression to include "actions" such as multimedia events, street performances, poetry readings and political provocation. The concept of the action is integral to Beuys' art and provides an important link with his political activity. An action performed in 1964 in Aachen unexpectedly engendered intense political controversy and was complicated by Beuys' refusal to define his position vis-a-vis the right or left factions. Beuys has observed that "the events in Aachen acted as a catalyst for a process of becoming aware which led to increasingly conscious political behavior on my part." (p. 90) Since 1964 Beuys has become increasingly active in politics. In 1967 he founded the German Student Party and the Organization for Direct Democracy. In 1972 he was dismissed from the Kunstakademie ostensibly because he ignored enrollment limitations in his classes. With Heinrich Böll he subsequently wrote the manifesto for the Free International University for Creativity and Interdisciplinary Research, an organization with which he is now deeply involved. Most recently, in June of 1979, Beuys ran for the European Community Parliament; although unsuccessful, he received a significant number of votes.



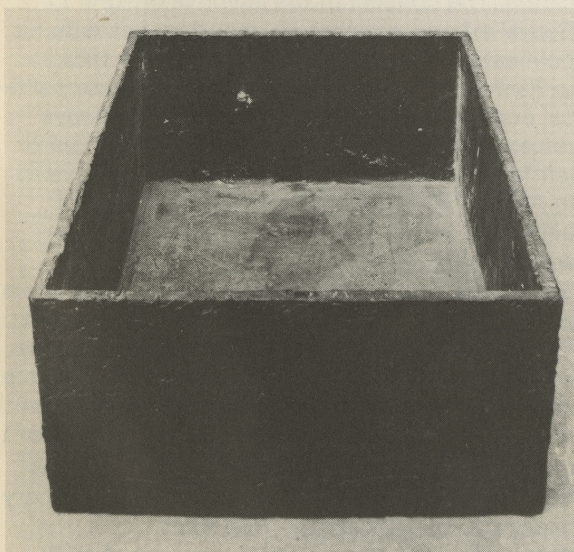
Honey pump. 1977
Honey, margarine, ships' engines, steel container, plastic tube, bronze pots
Collection Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebaek, Denmark
Photo ©Ute Klophaus

Rubberized Box, 1957, and *Fat Chair*, 1964, both from Station 8, exemplify Beuys' definition of the Theory of Sculpture. The following statements by the artist help explicate these pieces as well as his unusual, seemingly perverse, choice of materials.

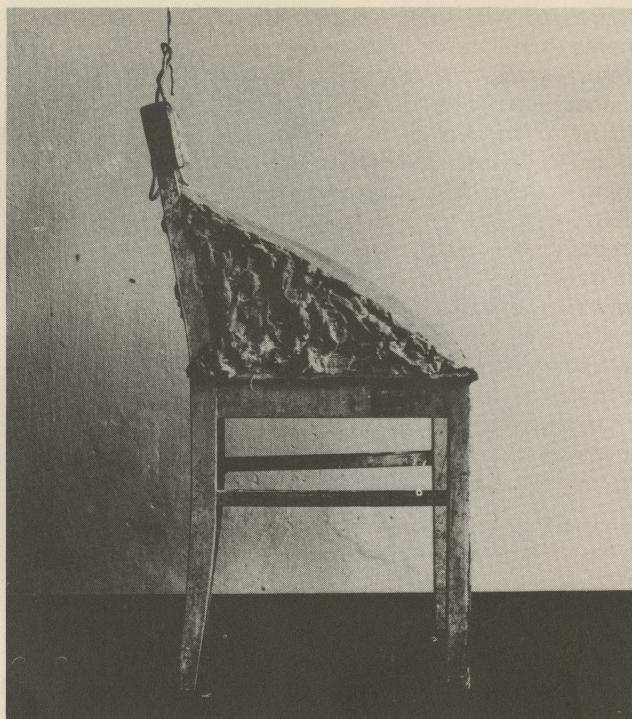
The outward appearance of every object I make is the equivalent of some aspect of inner human life. This box came out of my period of crisis in Düsseldorf-Heerdt and expresses my inner condition. My feelings then had this special kind of darkness—almost black like this mixture of rubber and tar. It is certainly an equivalent of the pathological state mentioned before, and expresses the need to create a space in the mind from which all disturbances were removed: an empty insulated space. Within this space investigations can take place, and from this concentration new experiences can emerge. This is a prerequisite for every experiment with the Theory of Sculpture: the principle of the insulator.

The nature of the materials used means this insulation has an elastic quality, softening the rigid form of the box which has nothing to do with minimalism. In addition it is significant that the box is open, which suggests that while everything else in the environment works as a distraction, energy directed towards or flowing from a higher level increases concentration. The mixture of asphalt and rubber on wood functions as a sound insulator too. Asphalt insulates electric power, while rubber resists blows. With time its elasticity has gone and the surface has hardened, although originally you could knead it.

People will always bring their own associations to such an object. Many think of the padded prison cell, for instance, although that was not my intention. While such a cell can be seen as a kind of insulator, such associations are too specific. On the other hand reference to extremes of isolation, as in the practice of prison control today, can certainly be sensed. The infliction of such isolation as punishment is an example of authoritarian pathology: but if an individual has the inner strength to survive it, it can, like pain, lead to new levels of awareness. (p. 70)



Rubberized Box. 1957
Pine wood covered with rubber and tar
Hessisches Landesmuseum Darmstadt, Sammlung Karl Ströher
Photo Stedelijk van Abbe Museum, Eindhoven



Fat Chair. 1964
Wooden chair with fat
Hessisches Landesmuseum Darmstadt, Sammlung Karl Ströher
Photo Eva Beuys

My initial intention in using fat was to stimulate discussion. The flexibility of the material appealed to me particularly in its reactions to temperature changes. This flexibility is psychologically effective—people instinctively feel it relates to inner processes and feelings. The discussion I wanted was about the potential of sculpture and culture, what they mean, what language is about, what human production and creativity are about. So I took an extreme position in sculpture, and a material that was very basic to life and not associated with art. At this time, although I had not exhibited, the students and artists who saw this piece did have some curious reactions which confirmed my feelings about the effect of placing fat in a corner. People started to laugh, get angry, or try to destroy it.

The fat on the *Fat Chair* is not geometric, as in the *Fat corners*, but keeps something of its chaotic character. The ends of the wedges read like a cross-section cut through the nature of fat. I placed it on a chair to emphasize this, since here the chair represents a kind of human anatomy, the area of digestive and excretive warmth processes, sexual organs and interesting chemical change, relating psychologically to will power. In German the joke is compounded as a pun since *Stuhl* (chair) is also the polite way of saying shit (stool), and that too is a used and mineralized material with chaotic character, reflected in the texture of the cross section of fat.

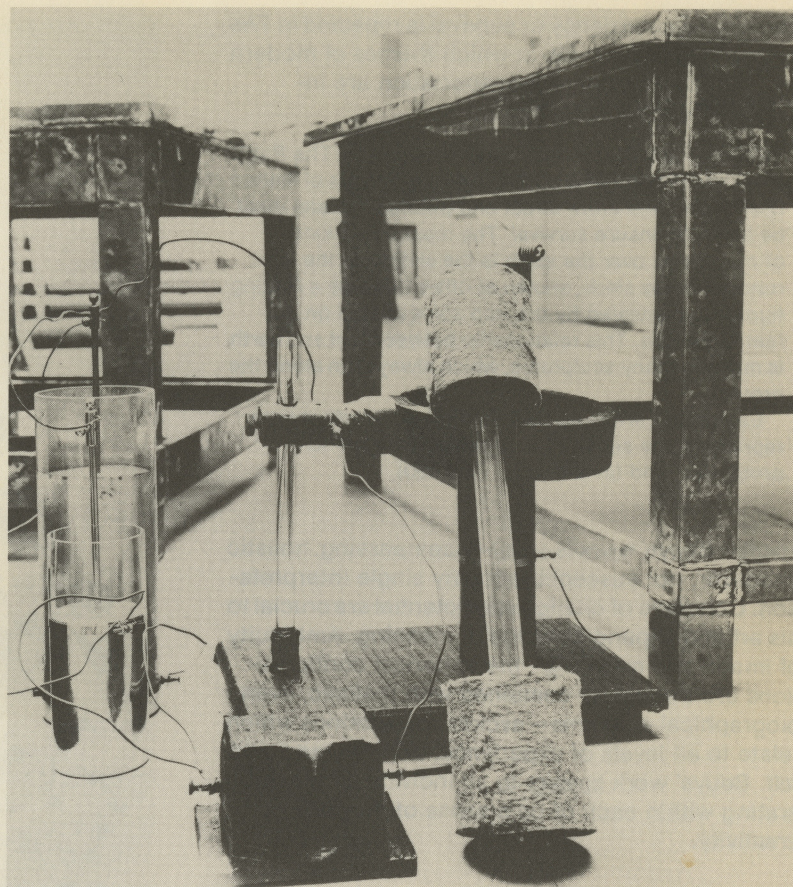
The presence of the chair has nothing to do with Duchamp's Readymades, or his combination of a stool (!) with a bicycle wheel, although they share initial impact as humorous objects.

Now, fifteen years later, I can say that without this *Fat Chair* and the *Fat corners* as vehicles none of my activities would have had such an effect. It started an almost chemical process among people that would have been impossible if I had only spoken theoretically. (p. 72)

Thus Beuys progressed from using fat and felt as sculptural elements to integrating these materials into the architectural environment, such as corners of rooms. And most recently he has made *Tallow*, 1977, Station 23, from a mold of an actual concrete underpass in Münster, chosen explicitly for its lack of human meaning in the architectural context of that city. By 1968, when Beuys made *Fond II*, Station 13, his reputation in Europe was well established. His work continued to evolve in a logical and coherent way, as he expanded upon the themes and subjects that earlier compelled him. A single image may evoke seemingly contradictory associations: for example, the batteries in *Fond II* symbolize the most fundamental forces of cosmic energy and their transmission and at the same time call to mind modern technology.

In *Fond II* the concentration is on the electrical charging of an object, in this case two tables thickly coated with copper. The tables have the connotation of a normal working place and become a *fond* on which other objects can be placed. Through the process of induction and charging via the battery and the inductor a charge is released. It was exhibited several times in a charged state of 20,000 volts at Documenta 4, at Eindhoven, and at Münchengladbach. The charge from the 12-volt battery is transformed to 20,000 volts in the inductor so it is a high tension system creating big sparks, though the amperes diminish. In the object every stage of transformation is visible though the sparks are scarcely perceptible in daylight.

The speed is important, and varies in the *Fonds*. The charge is quick in this *Fond II* and in *Fond O* with the copper lightning conductor, while the later piles of felt in *Fonds III* and *IV/4* represent a slow process of fermentation, induced by piling. So in *Fond II* the emphasis is on copper as a swift conductor, in contrast to the felt which acts as an insulator. (p. 134)



Fond II. 1968
Copper tables, batteries and chemical apparatus
Hessisches Landesmuseum Darmstadt, Sammlung Karl Ströher
Photo Eva Beuys

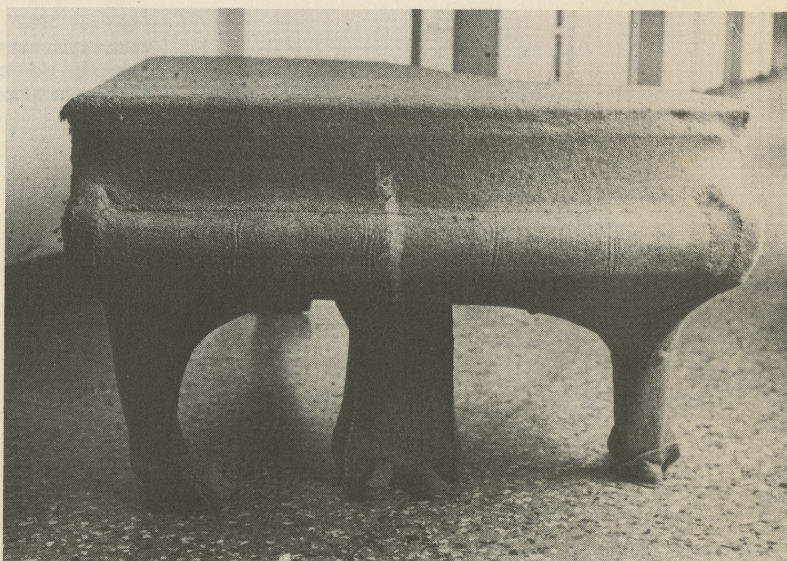
A number of sculptures, such as Station 18, *Infiltration-homogen for grand piano* of 1966, were made during actions. While directly linked to the experience of the action, they function also as meaningful objects with their own unique visual and emotional impact.

The sound of the piano is trapped inside the felt skin. In the normal sense a piano is an instrument used to produce sound. When not in use it is silent, but still has a sound potential. Here, no sound is possible and the piano is condemned to silence. On the same principle, I made several *Infiltration-homogens* for cello for Charlotte Moorman, which she still performs. . . .

Infiltration-homogen describes the character and structure of felt, so the piano becomes an homogeneous deposit of sound with the potential to filter through felt.

The relationship to the human position is marked by the two red crosses signifying emergency: the danger that threatens if we stay silent and fail to make the next evolutionary step.

Such an object is intended as a stimulus for discussion, and in no way is it to be taken as an aesthetic product. (p. 168)



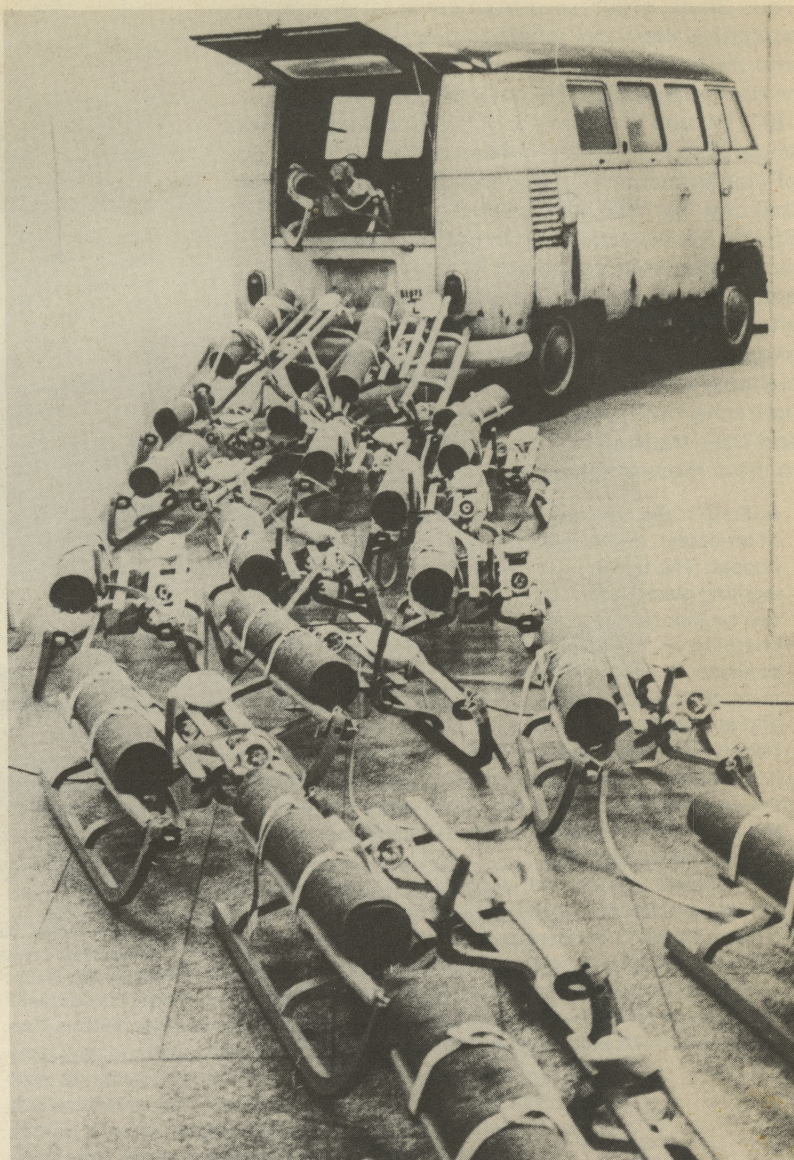
Infiltration-homogen for grand piano. 1966
Bechstein piano covered with felt
Collection Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris
Photo ©Ute Klopheus

The idea of emergency or survival is repeated in *The Pack*, 1969, Station 19, in which themes of modern and primitive means of transportation are infused with poignancy and humor.

This is an emergency object: an invasion by *The Pack*. In a state of emergency the Volkswagen bus is of limited usefulness, and more direct and primitive means must be taken to ensure *survival*. The most direct kind of movement over the earth is the sliding of the iron runners of the sleds, shown at other times as a skating figure or suggested by the iron soles placed on my feet in *Eurasia*. This relationship between feet and earth is made in many sculptures, which always run along the ground.

Each sled carries its own survival kit: the flashlight represents the sense of orientation, then felt for protection, and fat is food. (p. 190)

Joseph Beuys' work is an all-encompassing, holistic endeavor, not susceptible to any single interpretation. Concepts of change and potential are crucial to his art and expand its range of meaning. Ambiguity of image and meaning—metaphorical configurations are frequently combined with realistic, even biographical elements—evokes associations which relate to all levels of experience, both learned and felt. Beuys' work speaks to all individuals by generating within each of us a sense of genuine creativity.



The Pack. 1969
Volkswagen bus with sleds with felt, fat and flashlights
Collection Herbig
Photo ©Ute Klopheus